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A Time for Decision

IN THE NATION

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Does it sound reasonable to you that Congress should give President Reagan the money he wants for the Nicaraguan "contras," if Mr. Reagan will resume negotiations with the Sandinista regime and fully inform Congress as to how the money is spent?

All that sounded so reasonable last year that Congress bought the deal and approved the \$27 million in "humanitarian aid" that Mr. Reagan then sought for the contras. Now he wants \$30 million more, plus \$70 million in direct military assistance — sums Congress seems so unwilling to provide that once again talk of compromise is in the air.

Well, if the outcome of last year's deal is any guide, Congress has every reason to conclude "once burned, twice shy." First, Government auditors have told Congress that more than \$7 million of last year's aid appropriation cannot be accounted for. So much for keeping Congress fully informed.

Second, if Mr. Reagan has made more than token efforts to resume good-faith negotiations with the Sandinistas, they are about as well reported as that missing \$7 million. The Administration has insisted on the precondition that the Sandinistas first negotiate with the contras, although few governments ever negotiate with insurgents trying to overthrow them.

And when the foreign ministers of eight major Latin nations came to Washington last month to urge the Administration to end the contra war and open talks with the Sandinistas, their proposals were rejected out of hand. So much for pursuing a negotiated settlement.

The compromise proposals being floated this year are roughly of the same stripe. In one version, Congress would approve the \$100 million and immediately send \$30 million in "humanitarian aid" to the contras; the \$70 million in military assistance would be withheld for 90 days while the Administration tried to open negotiations with the Sandinistas.

Any member of Congress who goes for that can't or won't or pretends not to remember that Mr. Reagan welshed on the same deal last year. Passing such a "compromise" is equivalent to giving him the \$70 million in June instead of March, which no doubt is precisely what would be intended by most of the stalwart souls who might vote for this fig leaf over a sellout.

A second version of "compromise" — promoted, significantly, by Senator Richard Lugar, a devout supporter of Mr. Reagan's war in Nicaragua — gives the President all he

Congress should reject funding for the 'contras'

wants with the laughable proviso that Congress might bravely take it back later on. The \$100 million would go immediately to the contras, but might be "suspended" unless — fat chance! — the Sandinistas held new elections approved by the Administration (Elliott Abrams and Pat Buchanan?) and stopped the aid to the Salvadoran insurgents that the Administration is still trying to prove they're sending.

This isn't, in any case, the time for even a decent rather than a deceptive compromise. The contras having significantly failed since Mr. Reagan's C.I.A. organized them either to weaken the Sandinistas' grip on power or to gain a foothold — not even a toehold — in Nicaragua, Mr. Reagan's policy of supporting them is a clear failure. Now is the time to recognize that — and for the Democrats to make the case in their election campaigns.

The President's contra policy has had four years and untold millions of U.S. taxpayers' dollars, and what results are there to show for the effort? No change in Nicaragua; the opposition of every major Latin nation and all Nicaragua's neighbors save dependent El Salvador; and a contra force that has no home, no legitimacy and no prospects for either.

If Congress cuts off the money, flatly and finally, with a clear ban on C.I.A. or other secret contingency funds being substituted, the President may be forced to acquiesce in some negotiated regional arrangement that would be enforced by Nicaragua's neighbors, not the Gringo Colossus. Already, Honduras has ruled out further aid shipments to the contras through that once-compliant country; and the newly elected Presidents of Costa Rica and Guatemala strongly favor regional talks. Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, Colombia, the Contadora nations — all stand ready to help.

Now, then, is the time for members of Congress to reject a failed policy, forget weaselly "compromises," and throw their support to the regional settlement to which they've long paid lip service. They can't have that, and the contras too. □